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ABSTRACT

Because people meeting across cultures often carry with them misunderstandings and suspicions--relationship problems which must be resolved before any task can be completed--the phrase "problem-solving" must be defined more literally when applied to intercultural communication. Sources of cultural conflict must be recognized and addressed before either friendship or task cooperation is possible. Among these problems are uses of language, uses of paralanguage, conceptions of time, and conceptions of space. No language can be literally translated into another--idioms, cultural images, and connotative nuances require careful interpretation in order to convey accurate meaning instead of mere words. The sounds and silences which accompany speech (the paralanguage) also vary widely among cultures, and may sometimes obscure its content. The use of time is also a form of communication, and is subject to misunderstanding when cultures described as monochronic (emphasizing punctuality and sequential completion of tasks) interact with polychronic cultures, or those less concerned with schedules and deadlines. Finally, knowledge of cultural differences in the use of space is also important for intercultural communication. Discovering and honoring these cultural differences is central to building relationships or engaging in tasks with people from different cultures. (MM)

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Key Concepts and Principles of Cross-Cultural Problem Solving

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In the study of human communication, the phrase "problem-solving" usually refers to group decision-making—the process of reaching concensus or completing a task. But "problem-solving" must be defined more literally when applied to intercultural communication. When people meet from across cultures, they often carry with them misunderstandings and suspicions—relationship problems which must be resolved before any task can be completed. Thus conflict resolution must often precede decision-making in intercultural encounters. This essay will discuss some sources of cultural conflict which must be recognized and addressed before either friendship or task cooperation is possible. Among these problems are uses of language, uses of paralanguage, conceptions of time, and conceptions of space.

Language

An "interpreter" is a better name than "translator" for someone who changes one language into another. For no language can be literally translated into another; idioms, cultural images, and connotative nuances require careful interpretation in order to convey accurate meaning instead of mere words. When this is not recognized, breakdowns in communication can occur which produce awkwardness at best and serious conflict at worst. A Spanish-speaking business woman from South America once gave her English-speaking associate in New York a coat made from fine Argentinean wool as as expression of good will. When she tried on the coat, the North American woman said she was "tickled to death." Her words passed through a translator and the Argentinean heard to her dismay: "I'm itching so much I think I'll die." Such an exchange of words without consideration of cultural connotations

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can also be illustrated by computers—more and more of which are communicating directly with each other across cultures. For example, a computer transmission of the English phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" was converted into Japanese as "license to commit lustful pleasures."

Semanticists remind us that "the map is not the thing," and words are only maps of intentions and concepts. Misreading a verbal map is particularly likely when cultural idioms and proverbs are involved. A serious instance with continuing consequences occurred between John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khruschev at their Vienna summit conference in 1961. During a spirited exchange, Khruschev said: "We will bury you." This phrase was picked up by reporters and politicians and is still quoted over two decades later as proof of Soviet aggressive intentions and as justification for military increases of our own. Actually, Khruschev was using an old Russian proverb, meaning "we will outlast you," "we will still be here when you are gone," or "we will be here when you are buried." Properly understood, the words are still a challenge, but hardly raise the specter of planned nuclear obliteration which is usually attributed to them.

If people are to reach understanding across cultures, they must recognize that apparent disagreements are sometimes misunderstandings. They must become their own interpreters in the fullest sense—and search beyond langauge toward meaning. Only then can trust begin and tasks move forward.

Paralanguage

The sounds and silences which accompany speech are almost a language in themselves, and vary widely among different cultures. The sound of communication may sometimes obscure its content.

Intonation patterns are learned with one's native language and are seldom learned as well in a second language. Thus, a lecturer from another culture who writes perfect English and speaks with little accent may still

leave listeners confused. The fault, however, is not entirely the speaker's. The predictability of inflection patterns by native speakers encourages lazy listening—for the inflections at the beginning of sentences usually foretell how the thought will end. Consequently, speakers who do not use predicable intonations require listeners to concentrate on the entire thought. Americans who visit Scotland and England soon realize that intonations differ even within a single language—and they must become more constant listeners.

A harshness in the sound of language can easily be misunderstood as rudeness, even as hostility. An American who lived in Greece for three years recalls the "typical" rudeness of a merchant from whom he bought the daily paper. The merchant made the Greek words "Can I help?" sound like a curse and always slammed the merchandise down on the counter accompanied by an equally harsh-sounding "Here you are!" One morning, the American had cut himself shaving and went to the merchant to buy gauze to stop the bleeding. When he saw the problem, the merchant came out of his kiosk and held an antiseptic bandage to the man's neck until the bleeding stopped. Only when certain that the problem was solved did he return smiling to his stall and slam the morning paper onto the counter with his usual abrupt-sounding words. After this incident, the American was much less inclined to make character judgments on the basis of paralanguage—an important lesson since the sounds of English can also be unpleasant to the ears of others. In fact, one group of immigrants to the United States, who were hearing English for the first time, said it sounded like "cats meowing."

The uses of silence also vary greatly among cultures, with many Americans ill at ease during long pauses. The tendency to rush in with more words is one factor in the aggressive, "pushy" image conveyed by many Americans. In addition to causing interpersonal conflict, the American addiction to words can place American businessmen and negotiators at a

disadvantage in task situations. The Japanese industrialist or Russian negotiator may use silence to take the opponent's measure and establish the appearance of inflexibility. An American whose only tools of response are words may soon find that the opposition's silence has elicited words of compromise. In some Native American sub-cultures, silence is a sign of respect; it would be a serious mistake for a white teacher in an Arizona Indian school to misinterpret such silence as ignorance in the children or indifference in their parents.

Through paralanguage, no less than language, relationships are defined and task accomplishment is affected. Problem-solving between persons of different cultures must begin with the problem of their own misunderstandings.

Time

Some cultures have been described as monochronic and others as polychronic. North Americans and Western Europeans tend to be monochronic, emphasizing punctuality, deadlines, agendas, and sequential completion of tasks. Southern Europeans, Latin Americans, Arabic and Oriental peoples are much less concerned with schedules and deadlines—and are often involved in numerous unfinished tasks.

A monochronic businessman may mistakenly assume that his Bolivian counterpart is inefficient or uninterested when the latter appears two hours late for an appointment. A monochronic diplomat may be equally irritated by an Arabian leader who insists on yet another reception and dinner, and a further exchange of gifts, before a vital document is given attention. But these are differences in the perception and use of time, not differences in commitment toward the task at hand. In a polychronic culture, casualness about appointments and deadlines indicates a confidence that everything will happen in a natural way between people who trust each other—while pressure to reach a settlement by an appointed time conveys to them distrust and suspicious

abruptness. In Middle-Eastern and Oriental cultures, drawn-out ceremonies are not just social preliminaries to decision-making, but an integral part of establishing the mutual respect without which a paper agreement is useless. The dinners and toasts in China's Great Hall of the People and obligatory visits to the Great Wall are as important to the agreements between Western and Chinese diplomats as any signed document on Taiwan or Hong Kong. Japanese hosts have been known to frustrate Americans by refusing to discuss a business contract during several days of elaborate entertainment, but finally sign a mutually valuable agreement in the taxi en route to the airport.

The use of time is a form of communication—and thus, like all communication, is subject to misunderstanding. Persons from a monochronic culture would do well to remember that apparently casual or ambiguously ritualized behavior may not mean ineptness nor disinterest, and their own "unseemly haste" could be destructive to the very understandings they seek.

Space

Edward Hall has described in detail the cultural differences in use of space and the important implications of this for intercultural communication. Although many Americans scoffed at the "wasted" time spent discussing the size and shape of the table at the Vietnam peace negotiations in Paris—this was in fact an essential part of establishing initial positions and identities, without which no negotiations could occur.

Americans require more personal space around them than people from many other cultures. In a business, diplomatic, or other task interaction, Americans usually maintain a distance of 18 to 24 inches—a lesser distance implying intimacy or hostility. Latin Americans, on the contrary, usually stand closer—and Arab peoples want to be close enough to see directly into their counterparts' eyes and preferably inhale his/her breath. Americans who do not realize these cultural differences will find themselves constantly

backing away or trying to position themselves behind a desk—thus insulting the other person and creating a new problem instead of moving toward problem-solution. Japanese require little space in public and may wedge their American visitors into crowded taxis or crammed buses; but within the privacy of the Japanese home, the spacing and arrangement of chairs at the dining table may communicate important statements about status and respect; an American would be ill advised to sit down before being accorded his proper place.

Americans have historically had more space within which to evolve their cultural patterns. People from other cultures, particularly densely populated areas, have evolved different definitions and expectations. Mutual knowledge of these variations must precede discussion of issues—for substantive problems cannot be solved without prior respect for behavioral differences.

Conclusion

Ethnocentrism is an attitute which views and judges all other cultures by the patterns of one's own. The result of ethnocentrism is inevitably misunderstanding, stereotyping—and conflict escalation instead of problem resolution. No person need understand all the nuances of another culture in order to build a relationship or engage in a task with a person from that culture. But each person must be aware that essential differences in perception, expression, and behavior exist between cultures. Discovering and honoring these differences is not peripheral, but central to forging friendships and agreements between individuals and nations. Perceptive intercultural communication can indeed solve problems, but imperceptive approaches will only create new ones.

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